DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 262 599 FL 015 266

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TITLE A Search for Sex Differences in the Language of 10 Year Olds and Adults.
PUB DATE [85]
NOTE 21p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adjectives; *Adults; *Children; Comparative Analysis; *Cultural Influences; *Language Styles; Language Usage; *Sex Differences; *Social Influences; Vocabulary

ABSTRACT

Controversial claims made about characteristics of "women's speech" are examined in a comparison of certain aspects of the language used by 17 ten-year-olds (9 boys and 8 girls) and 20 adults (10 men and 10 women, mean age 20.0 years), all native speakers of English. The subjects were asked to pretend to speak on the telephone to a person of designated status (higher, equal, lower) and degree of familiarity (familiar and unfamiliar), and to make a particular type of request (borrow or return an item). Eight dependent speech variables were assessed: hesitations, including speech disfluencies such as errors and fillers; hedges and modifiers such as "sort of" and "I think"; tag questions such as "...okay?"; the number of words uttered in each situation; syntactic directness; and empty and neutral adjectives such as "sweet" and "good." Four statistical analyses were performed to determine any effects of sex on language. None revealed any significant main effects or interactions of sex in either children or adults, contradicting previous assertions. Further research on factors such as relative speaker status, conversational situation, and other speech characteristics as they relate to sex differences is recommended. A three-page reference list is appended. (MSE)

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A Search for Sex Differences in the Language of 10 Year Olds and Adults

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Running Head: Sex Differences in Language

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Abstract

Jesperson (1922) and Lakoff (1973) have made a number of controversial claims about characteristics of "women's speech." Women are said to use a greater number of words, hesitations, hedges and modifiers, tag questions, and empty adjectives as well as be more indirect than men. Such sex differences are claimed to be present by the time children are 10 years old. The six linguistic characteristics were observed in the speech of 10 year olds and adults in an experiment that controlled for the relative status of speakers and listeners and for context. No sex differences were obtained. The implications of these results for current conceptions of sex differences in language are discussed.

A search for sex differences in the
language of 10 year olds and adults

For many years there has been an interest in sex differences in the use of language. Anthropologists have found that some societies have separate languages for men and women (Chamberlain, 1912; Furfey, 1944). Sex differences have also been found in pitch of the voice (Sachs, 1975; Weinberg & Bennett, 1971), pronunciation, nouns and pronouns, sentence structure, and semantic shading (Key, 1972). In addition, Bodine (1975) has described "sex-preferential differentiations." By this she meant language that is not exclusive to one sex, but predominantly used by that sex.

Jesperson (1922) was among those who first distinguished between the language used by men and that used by women. He considered male language to be the norm and female language to be a deviant form. Further, he stated that, compared to men, women use incomplete sentences, talk more quickly, do not have the same semantic value for words, and speak more. Jesperson's conclusions were drawn from a study of novels written by male authors and of other literature. Nonetheless, his evaluation of women's language has been overwhelmingly accepted, even without empirical support (Kramer, 1974).

In two examples of contradictory evidence, Brotherton and Penman (1977) and Swacker (1975) failed to confirm Jesperson's claim that women speak more than men. Brotherton and Penman had men and women describe three TAT cards, one with a male theme, a second with a female theme, and a third with a sex-neutral theme. They found no differences between the sexes in number of words spoken or number of words produced

per second. On the other hand, Swacker (1975) found men to speak longer and use more words than women. She had men and women describe black and white Dürer prints. The results of these studies suggest that Jesperson's assertion that men's language is different from and superior to women's language is questionable. However, other factors than number of words spoken should also be considered.

One of the most controversial and frequently-cited papers dealing with sex differences in language has been Lakoff's (1973) introspective paper. She based her statements about characteristics of women's speech on her own experiences, the experiences of her acquaintances, and television commercials rather than on empirical investigation. Lakoff argued that women's language is characterized by:

1. lexical choices: words used almost exclusively by women (e.g., beige, aquamarine). If men use such words, they will either be labeled homosexual or said to be satirizing women.
2. empty adjectives: adjectives used not only for their literal meaning, but because they are considered to be more appropriate for "frivolous" situations. Examples of empty adjectives are charming, lovely, and divine.
3. neutral adjectives: (e.g., great, terrific, neat) adjectives permissible for both men and women. A woman's choice of these adjectives depends upon the context in which she is speaking.
4. tag questions: a method of questioning that allows women to make a statement without making an assertion. An example is the won't you? in You will return it, won't you?

5. hedges and modifiers: such phrases include sort of, kind of, and I guess. This usage makes a statement less assertive. Included in this category is the word so, as in Fred is so dumb! or That sunset is so beautiful! This intensive use of so allows women to avoid strong commitment to an opinion and may function similarly to the tag question.

6. polite/indirect speech: ways to make a request rather than give a command. The more parts of a sentence that reinforce the idea of a request rather than a command, the more polite and indirect it is. The following examples are increasingly indirect: (a) Close the door. (b) Please close the door. (c) Will you close the door? (d) Will you please close the door? and (e) Is that door open? The last request gives the most freedom to the listener to refuse the request.

Lakoff's proposed characteristics of women's language have found mixed support. For example, in research investigating the use of tag questions, DuBois and Crouch (1975) found that men used more tag questions than women. In discussions at a small professional meeting, men posed 33 tag questions while women used none. This result is provocative, but the study had methodological problems: Participants were at liberty to come and go, so there was no control for sex or number of subjects. Consequently, an audience might have been comprised of all men or all women at any time. One is left to wonder about the contexts and intended listeners of the tag questions. From this study alone, it is difficult to draw conclusions about women's use of tag questions in general.

Crosby and Nyguist (1977) defined the "female register" as entailing female lexical choices, empty adjectives, tag questions, modifiers and

hedges, and the use of so. In a laboratory study of 16 women and 16 men, they found that women used the female register more than men when each conversed with same-sex listeners. In a second study, conversations between a police officer and a person seeking information and/or aid were coded. Forty five women and 45 men were observed. Women used the female register more than did men. In a comparable third study at an information booth in a municipal center, though, no sex differences were found.

In another investigation of one of Lakoff's proposed characteristics, Brouwer, Gerritsen, and DeHaan (1979) examined the requests of 309 women and 278 men who were purchasing tickets in a Dutch railway station. They found no support for claims that women's speech is more polite and less direct than that of men, or that women use more self-corrections and repetitions than men.

How can these seemingly inconsistent results be resolved and explained? It may be that factors such as the relative status of the participants and the contexts in which language was used were not controlled sufficiently. Status has a significant effect on many human behaviors, including language (Becker, 1982). Status is often defined as the power to manipulate others and to control resources. Status can be based on such things as social or economic position or age, and it may change as one moves from one group to another. Relative status of speaker and listener is an important influence on the language interactants use. Several authors (Borker, 1980; Brown, 1980; McConnell-Ginet, 1980) have suggested that previous researchers confounded sex with status. Thus, what have been labeled sex differences may in fact be differences due to differential status or power.

Some theorists argue that males tend to be dominant in our society and that language is one means of indicating and ensuring men's position (Kramarae, 1981; Spender, 1980). One place this is seen is in women's use of indirect speech. Equivocation is used in seeking approval from a higher status person or in a situation that involves the speaker's precarious status. While men may use indirect speech in certain situations in which they risk a loss of status, it is presumably the language of women that is typified by indirect and polite speech. (Becker (1984) and Brown (1980) elaborate on the ways in which indirect speech serves these social ends.) Some support for the relation between status and indirectness is found in Crosby and Nyquist's (1977) observation, in the study of interactions in a police station, that those seeking aid or information (regardless of sex) used the female register more than police personnel did. In addition, Brouwer et al. (1979) noted that when the ticket seller in the railway station was male, travelers used more words, polite speech, and requests for information than when the seller was female. This was true for both male and female speakers.

More direct empirical support for the claim that language differences are largely due to status differences is found in two other studies. Baroni and D'Urso (1984) audiotaped male and female speakers reading texts in "polite" and "impolite" tones of voice. When the tapes of male and female speakers were loosely equated for degree of politeness, subjects hearing the tapes tended to associate a polite tone with the speakers' lower status. Subjects also tended to believe that the more polite tone was being used with a higher status listener and the less polite tone with a listener of lower status than the speaker's.

In a similar study, O'Barr and Atkins (1980) had men and women use

speech with or without Lakoff's (1973) proposed features of women's speech. O'Barr and Atkins referred to these variations as "powerless" and "powerful" language, respectively. Regardless of sex of speaker, subjects viewed the powerful speech, that without Lakoff's features, as more believable, convincing, and trustworthy. O'Barr and Atkins also reported an observational study of courtroom witnesses' language. They found that the alleged features of women's language were not characteristic of all women nor exclusively used by women, although women comprised the more frequent users of those features. Interestingly, the exceptions to this trend (i.e., those women who used few such features) were women of high social status.

Clearly, relative status of speaker and listener is a factor that might help explain inconsistencies in the literature on sex differences in language. However, it is not a sufficient explanation. The context in which conversations take place is also important (Becker, 1982; Borker, 1980; Brown, 1980; McConnell-Ginet, 1980). Context encompasses participants, type of interaction, and physical place of occurrence. Lakoff (1973) acknowledged the importance of context when discussing a woman's choice of adjectives. She suggested that, when addressing an advertising conference, a woman will choose the adjectives she deems appropriate to a female advertising executive (e.g., What a terrific idea!). Lakoff called such adjectives "neutral." In contrast, the same woman will choose what Lakoff referred to as an "empty" adjective when it is suggested that she dye her poodle to match her cigarette lighter (e.g., What a divine idea!). The choice depends on whether the situation is considered to be "frivolous, trivial, or unimportant to the world at large" (p. 52). Both Brouwer et al. (1979) and Crosby and

Nyguist (1977) also discussed context. They attempted to explain their findings of no sex differences by suggesting that the language used at ticket and information booths is of relatively simple and fixed form. To the extent that speech in a particular context is ritualized, it may decrease the possibility of finding sex (or other) differences in language.

The present study was an attempt to disentangle the effects of sex, status, and context on the characteristics of language Lakoff (1973) and Jesperson (1922) described. It was also an attempt to search for these characteristics in children's speech.

McCarthy (1953) proposed that sex differences are established early, through identification with the same-sex parent. Gleason (1979) agreed, saying that "parents' speech is sex-typed... and children will eventually take on the speech characteristics of the same-sexed parent through imitation or social learning" (p. 154). She found that fathers and mothers interacted differently with their preschoolers depending upon sex. For example, boys were more likely to be called by jocular names (e.g., Buster, Tiger, or Dingaling) and more likely to be threatened by their fathers (e.g., I'll knock your block off) than were girls. Lakoff (1973) contended that language learning takes place in three more distinctive stages. Because mothers have more contact with and influence on children, she argued, boys and girls first learn women's language. Later (at some unspecified time and by means of an unspecified process), boys begin to use "rough talk" which evolves into men's language. Girls retain women's language and are discouraged from "rough talk." Lakoff concluded that "by ten or so, when children split up into same-sex peer groups, the two languages are present" (p. 47).

There is some evidence that parents' differential treatment of their

boys and girls has an impact on language. Andersen (1977) studied four to seven year olds' role playing behavior with puppets. The children revealed sex-differentiated speech in contrasting roles such as doctor and nurse. Levin and Hunter (1982) also observed children's play language. They had five to 12 year olds play and talk with a rabbit. Girls used more complex language, asked more questions, and were more affectionate in their language, while boys issued more direct requests and used more expressions of annoyance. Sex differences were present at all ages.

Children also appear to have beliefs about features of language typical of men and women. Edelsky (1977) studied stereotypes about sex-appropriate language by six, eight, and 11 year olds, as well as adults. Subjects read 24 sentences and indicated who would be most likely to say each, men, women, or either. Adults had clear sex stereotypes, including the belief that men use more direct language than women. Children showed a gradual progression toward the adult perceptions.

While there are a number of documented sex differences in young children's language, noone has directly assessed Lakoff's (1973) proposed characteristics in their speech. On the basis of Lakoff's claims about language development and the comparable assertions of McCarthy (1953) and Gleason (1979), one would expect to find at least rudimentary forms of "women's" and "men's" language in 10 year old girls and boys. A second purpose of the present study was to search for these early differences.

Thus, this study involved a search for Lakoff's (1973) and Jesperson's (1922) proposed characteristics of women's language in the speech of 10 year olds and adults. Both relative status of speaker and listener and context were controlled to enable the effects of these variables to

be separated from the effects of sex of speaker. Status was controlled by asking all subjects to address the same higher and lower status listeners as well as peers (listeners of the same age and sex). Context was controlled by means of a standardized task in which the general content of the messages was specified.

Method

Subjects

Seventeen 10 year olds (9 boys, 8 girls; mean age: 9;8 years) and 20 adults (10 men and 10 women; mean age: 20;0 years) who were native English speakers with no speech or hearing impairments participated in the study. Children were middle-class and drawn from a midwestern elementary school. Adults were drawn from a midwestern university's Department of Psychology Subject Pool and received extra credit in Introductory Psychology for participating. An additional three children (2 girls, 1 boy) were not included in the study because they were unable to complete the tasks.

Materials

Existing audiotapes and transcripts (collected for other purposes) were used for this study. In generating the tapes, subjects were asked to pretend to speak on the telephone to a person of a designated status and degree of familiarity, and to make a particular type of request of this listener. There were three levels of listener status (higher, equal, lower), two levels of familiarity (familiar, unfamiliar), and two types of requests (to borrow or to return an item). The order of the resulting 12 instructions was randomized and counter-balanced by subjects' age and sex. The audiotapes were transcribed independently by two research assistants blind to the purposes of the original study.

Procedure

A research assistant blind to the purposes of the present study coded the transcripts in several ways: number of hesitations, hedges and modifers, tag questions, number of words, and "empty" and "neutral" adjectives. The dependent variables were coded as follows:

Hesitations. Given a value of one for each occurrence, hesitations included any speech disfluencies such as errors and fillers. Examples of sentences that each contain two hesitations are "I-I-I can't find it" and "Could I, uh could I borrow your jacket?" Table 1 contains descriptions and examples of this and the other dependent variables.

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Hedges and modifiers. A value of one was given to each use of a hedge or modifier (e.g., sorta, kind of, I guess, I think, maybe).

Tag questions. The number of tag questions was counted. Tag questions are exemplified by the phrases at the end of the following two sentences: "You will remember, won't you?" and "I am coming to get it, okay?"

Number of words. A count was made of the number of words uttered in each situation. A hesitation such as uh or a partially spoken word (e.g., Could I bor- have the ball?) was counted as one word. Words such as gonna and sorta were counted as one word if they were transcribed in this manner. Contractions (e.g., don't, can't, won't) were counted as one word. Given the occurrence of ambiguous words (e.g., all-right vs. all right, goodbye vs. Good. Bye., uhuh vs. uh...huh?) the transcribers determined whether they sounded like one or two words. Any discrepancy or question about the transcripts was resolved by another research assistant who listened to the original audiotape. This research

assistant was also blind to the purposes of the study.

Syntactic directness. Coding for "initial" requests was part of the previous, unrelated study. An initial request was defined as the first request made of the listener regarding the item specified by the experimenter. Two research assistants independently coded each initial request for syntactic directness on the basis of Ervin-Tripp's (1976) system. See Table 2 for an explanation of this system. Inter-rater agreement for 10 year olds was .99 and for adults, .97. Disagreements

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were resolved by discussion. The requests were assigned values of 1-6 according to degree of syntactic directness. The most direct request, a statement, was given a value of one. A six was assigned to those requests coded as question directives, the most indirect requests.

Empty and neutral adjectives. A tally of two types of adjectives was made. Each occurrence was given a value of one. Examples of empty adjectives are charming, sweet, and lovely, while neutral adjectives are words such as neat, terrific, and good.

In assessing inter-rater agreement for each of the dependent measures except syntactic directness, the second author randomly selected every tenth transcript and independently coded them. Inter-rater agreement was 1.00 on tag questions, empty adjectives, and neutral adjectives; .99 on word count; and .91 on hesitations and hedges and modifiers. The codings of the research assistant were those used in subsequent analyses. These extremely high levels of agreement in coding the dependent variables indicated that analyses of the data could be done with confidence.

Results

In order to determine whether there were any effects of sex on language, four analyses were conducted. None of them revealed any significant effects of sex. First, a 2 (sex) x 2 (age: 10 year olds, adults) x 2 (familiarity: familiar, unfamiliar) analysis of variance was performed on five of the dependent variables: hesitations, hedges and modifiers, tag questions, number of words, and syntactic directness. There were neither significant main effects of sex nor any significant interactions involving sex. (There were other statistically significant findings which did not involve the variable of interest. They will not be discussed.)

Second, a 2 (sex) x 2 (age) x 2 (type of request: borrow, return) analysis of variance was performed on each of the five dependent variables. Again, there were no significant main effects of sex or interactions involving sex.

Third, a 2 (sex) x 2 (age) x 3 (listener status: higher, same, lower) multivariate analysis of variance was performed on each of the five dependent variables using the Pillais test, which is distributed approximately like F. Since there was unequal sample size, the regression approach to least squares MANOVA was utilized. There were no significant effects or interactions involving sex.

Finally, to determine whether males and females used empty and neutral adjectives differently, a 2 (sex) x 2 (predominant type of adjective: empty $>$ neutral, neutral $\geq$ empty) Chi square analysis was performed. No effect of sex was revealed.

Discussion

It is clear from these results that none of the sex differences in

language predicted by Jesperson (1922) and Lakoff (1973) were present. Sex differences were absent both in the speech of adults and that of 10 year olds, despite predictions to the contrary. This absence is especially noteworthy because the controlled design and analyses allowed the statistical removal of confounding factors in order to more clearly reveal any existing effects of sex.

What should one conclude from these results? It is tempting to argue, as other have, that there are not sex differences in language per se, but that apparent differences are due to other factors such as status differences. With that, one can dismiss the issue altogether. However, such a conclusion is not very enlightening. Instead, it is more appropriate to consider the circumstances under which men and women speak differently, for indeed they often do. Such an approach can help account for why, with the range of situations sampled, no sex differences were obtained in the present study while they were seen in other studies.

As Borker (1980) and Brown (1980) have asserted, it is important to consider sex as one contextual factor embedded in a network of influential social factors. Given this perspective, there are many questions that need to be investigated. For example, what contributes to individuals' status and how does the relative status of speaker and listener affect language? Which conversational situations are so ritualized and prescribed that they overpower and obscure other factors? How are various characteristics of speech differentially sensitive to characteristics of interactants and situations? Only when questions such as these are answered will we have a more complete and theoretically coherent account of the nature and development of sex differences in language.

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TABLE 1

Dependent Variable	Decision Criteria	Examples
HESITATIONS	Words which indicate pauses and/or fillers. Also the repetition of words and partially spoken words and self-corrections.	
HEDGES AND MODIFIERS	Include words and phrases that indicate equivocation on the part of the speaker and allow the listener the option of directing further action and/or conversation.	sorta, kinda, I guess, sort of, maybe, I was wondering, kind of, I think, wondering, I wasn't sure, I mean, I don't think, the ungrammatical use of whatever, whenever, like, and you know.
TAG QUESTIONS	Marked by a statement with an agreement phrase tagged on the end. A particular answer is indicated, but the speaker is reluctant to state it directly. The phrase at the end indicates a desire for agreement from the listener.	
NEUTRAL AND EMPTY ADJECTIVES	Both neutral and empty adjectives operate to indicate the speaker's approval and/or admiration of something. They differ in that empty adjectives are used when referring to what is considered by the speaker to be a frivolous, trivial, or unimportant situation.	NEUTRAL: neat, great, terrific, good, cool. EMPTY: charming, adorable, sweet, lovely, divine, pretty, fine, nice.
WORD COUNT	Hesitations such as uh and partially spoken words were counted as one word. Also hyphenated words (e.g., all-right, bye-bye), contractions (e.g., can't, won't, don't), and ungrammatically run-together words (e.g., sorta, gonna).	

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Table 2

Classification of Syntactic Directness of Requests

(1) Statement=assertion that Speaker will get X: I'm going to get the X. (NOTE: Focus is on Speaker's activity.)

(2) Imperative=VERB (me) an X: Give me an X; Bring the X; You give me the X. (NOTE: Focus is on Listener's activity.)

(3) Need statement=I need/want/would like the X, because, I need it, I could use the X.

(4) Embedded imperative=Can/could/will/would/why don't you/ can't/won't you give me the X?; I was wondering if you could give me the X; If you could give me the X..., pronoun+modal verb. (NOTE: This is like an ability question. Focus is on the Listener's activity.)

(5) Permission directive=Can/May/Could I have the X?; Would it be OK/you mind if I had the X?; If I could have the X...?; I was wondering if I could have the X. (NOTE: Focus is on the Speaker's activity. Do not count Is that OK? or Would you mind?)

(6) Question directive=Form that is like an information question, but what is being requested isn't specified. A "no" answer constitues refusal or precludes a more direct request: Have an X? Are there any X's left? (NOTE: Question must relate to the object, not the Listener or object category. Do not count Remember me? or Have you heard of the X?)